
St. Aidan's Sermons

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Rev. Dr. Brett Cane, February 6, 2005

Transfiguration: 8:00, 9:15 & 11:05 am, Holy Communion

"Contemporary Issues #1: The Abuse of Tolerance"

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you have taught us to speak the truth in love; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to see how this principle is to work out with regard to concerns for tolerance, that we may truly express the compassion and mercy of our Father in Heaven. Amen.

Introduction

Today, we celebrate the Transfiguration. It was a moment in time when the disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus' hidden glory before he "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51) where he would experience the humiliation of the cross and the victory of the resurrection. It is an appropriate theme to have just before embarking on our Lenten journey with its Lenten disciplines. Lent is an opportunity to help us move on in our earthly pilgrimage of transformation into the glorious image of Christ. But that transformation does not merely concern us as individuals. Christ came to establish his Kingdom both within us, and through us, in the world. Part of our journey is to see how we can be more effective in our calling to be salt and light for him in the world (Matthew 5:13-16).

To that end, we have designed a series of five Lenten sermons focussing on how the faith addresses some of the contemporary issues of society. The topics include: tolerance, the environment, poverty, and Biblical perspectives on homosexuality. We begin today, one Sunday ahead of the official start of Lent, with "The Abuse of Tolerance".

The Challenge of Tolerance

Tolerance is a watchword in our society today. Being open to a variety of beliefs or lifestyles has become one of the prime virtues for a modern person. At the same time, it has become a major challenge facing Christians. In our disputes with the world or within the church, we accuse each other of "intolerance".

But we look at tolerance today with different eyes than a few years ago. The following assumptions or situations of society lie behind the subtle but significant transformation in our definition and view of tolerance:

- the first issue is ***truth itself***: these days, people are establishing their own personal sets of

values. When we make a statement we might hear the comment, "Well that may be true for you, but not for me." Truth has become relative, no longer absolute.

- the second issue is **pluralism**: with so many options and religions in the world, how can you say any one way is right?
- the third issue is **love, inclusivism**: we are challenged, "If you are a Christian, you have to love and include me; therefore you have to accept me, that is, agree with what I am doing"
- the fourth issue is **our nature as Canadians**: tolerance is especially crucial for us - as a country, we evolved, we did not rebel; our geography impels us to shun extremes, divergences - we feel we have to keep together and avoid disputes.

One word, two meanings

These assumptions and situations have led to a new definition of tolerance. It is important to understand that there has been a subtle but significant change in the whole concept of what tolerance is. It has become one word with two meanings. I am thankful to the Christian apologist Josh McDowell for an article I have found most helpful on the subject.¹

- **traditional**: the traditional definition of tolerance has been to recognize and respect other's beliefs, practices, etc, without necessarily agreeing or sympathising with them. In other words, everyone has the right to his or her own opinion.
- **post-modern**: the definition in use today has become that every individual's beliefs, values, lifestyle and truth claims are equally valid. In other words, all beliefs are equal.

What has happened is that we have moved beyond respecting a person's rights, to saying that every person is right. It demands praise and endorsement of that person's beliefs, values, and lifestyle. This is the definition of what I am calling the "new tolerance". It is really the abuse of tolerance.

Implications of the "new tolerance"

This new definition is not merely a change in outlook; it brings very serious implications as to how our society conducts itself and how we as Christians react and relate to it as well as how we react and relate within our own church family.

- the first implication is the **repression of public discourse**. Previously, people would challenge us to prove our position - "You say Jesus is the only way to God, prove it!" Now people challenge us with the right to say what we claim to be the truth. "Jesus is the only way to God, how dare you say that; who do you think you are? You have insulted everyone who holds another view!" The issue is no longer the truth of the message, but the right to proclaim it. The new tolerance has become the exact opposite of the old. Any unpopular message can be labelled "intolerant" and thus is to be repressed.
- the second implication is the **privatization of conviction**. If all beliefs are equally valid, then Christians will face pressure to keep silent because speaking out for Christ will be seen to be intolerant of the beliefs and lifestyles of others.
- the third implication is a **new wave of religious persecution**. Claiming to hold unique truth could be judged as a "hate crime" and face unpopularity, and even persecution (this would also include serious Jews and Muslims and all who claim divine revelation). This is evident

¹ Josh McDowell, "Truth and Tolerance", in "Focus on the Family" magazine, August, 1999, pgs. 6-7.

in the antagonism towards Christianity in particular in many of the university classrooms of our nation. A good example of costly intimidation was the dispute a few years ago with Trinity Western University and teacher graduate certification which went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada that I will mention in a few moments. Another example is the recent ruling compelling Manitoba justices of the peace to “marry” same-sex couples forcing many to resign out of conscience.

- a fourth implication is a *new inner turmoil for Christians*. At the General Synod in 2001, after a presentation on the pastoral care of those involved in the current debate over homosexual practice, (which presentation I found very coercive and intolerant of conservative concerns, by the way), one delegate was in tears. As she wept, she said to me, “I want to love everyone and be compassionate, but I don't agree with the practice, yet I feel I am not allowed to speak out.”

Exposing the Untruth

In addressing the subtle but effective challenge to our faith and practice brought by the "new tolerance", we need to unmask the faulty thinking behind its assumptions. One of the positions of the new tolerance is that we Christians do not practice what we preach - by disagreeing with a person's lifestyle or views, we are told that we are not accepting the person, not loving them as Jesus said we should. This argument has carried a lot of weight with Christians - it sounds so plausible. But all we have to do is think for a minute. When the child in my care runs out into the road, I tell him or her off. I disagree with the child, not because I dislike him or her, but because I love them - I am concerned their activity will lead to their harm.

Others will say, "Because you hold a certain position, you are not able to sympathise or care for that person - you will be intolerant towards them." This was the case in the dispute a few years ago between the British Columbia Institute of Teachers and the Christian university, Trinity Western. The BCIT would not recognize the graduates from TWU as qualified to teach because it said the university's requirement that all members of the university abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage or homosexual activity would render the teachers they graduate incapable of being able to be sympathetic or caring towards homosexual students in their future care. Now I am against adultery and murder and theft - in fact, every time we read the Ten Commandments in Lent and Advent, I ask God to "incline my heart to keep this law" and thus agree that abstaining from these things is good. Does that make me incapable of ministering to a person who comes to see me in my office caught in the trap of adultery or the man I visit in prison serving a sentence for murder or theft? Just because I disagree with a particular belief or lifestyle does not render me incapable of caring for or loving the person with whom I disagree.

Finally, Jesus himself set us the perfect example of accepting someone without agreeing with their lifestyle. In the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11), the religious people challenged Jesus to condemn the woman because of her behaviour. Jesus did not condemn the woman - "Neither do I condemn you" - but then he added - "Go and sin no more". His acceptance of the woman did not preclude him disagreeing with her lifestyle and telling her so. In fact, as I hope to show in a few moments, love demanded it. Acceptance of a person does not necessarily mean agreement with their views or lifestyle or lack of sympathy or compassion for them.

Our Response

What, then should be our response in this new climate of what is really "anti-tolerance"? How do we act and speak?

- ***hold together truth and love:*** before giving some practical steps, I want to mention what should be the guiding principle behind all we do or say.² In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul says, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching...Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:14-15). The key is to "speak the truth in love". I will use the helpful analogy that I have used before in explaining what this means. (In my hand I have) (Take) ordinary table salt - it is composed of the elements of sodium and chlorine. Taken alone, they are deadly but together, they are life-giving. It is the same with truth and love; "Truth" held alone leads to legalism with actions and relationships based solely on rules and regulations; "Love" held alone leads to permissiveness and sentimentality with actions and relationships based solely on feelings. We need to hold both together. The fact is, love is not love without truth and truth is not truth without love. If we are to follow Christ, it is the two together, love and truth, which must characterize our relationships.

With this principle in mind, Josh McDowell³ gives the following two paths to take simultaneously: humbly pursue truth and aggressively practice love:

- ***humbly pursue truth:*** Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). We are to counter the new doctrine of tolerance by showing it up for what it is - intolerant! Embrace all people but not all beliefs. Listen and learn from all people without necessarily agreeing with them. Speak out courageously for truth even if scorned. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15)
- ***aggressively practice love:*** the new tolerance simply avoids offending someone; love actively seeks to promote the other's good.
 - The new tolerance says, "You must approve of what I do." Love responds, "I must do something harder; I will love you, even when your behaviour offends me."
 - The new tolerance says, "You must agree with me." Love responds, "I must do something harder; I will tell you the truth because I am convinced the truth will set you free."
 - The new tolerance says, "You must allow me to have my way." Love responds, "I must do something harder; I will plead with you to follow the right way, because I believe you are worth the risk."
 - The new tolerance seeks to be inoffensive; love takes risks.
 - The new tolerance glorifies division; love seeks unity.
 - The new tolerance costs nothing; love costs everything.

Pursuing truth and practicing love: this is the way we will avoid abusing tolerance

² For a fuller treatment of this, see my St. Aidan's sermon of May 16, 2004, "Holding Together Truth and Love", obtainable on www.mts.net/~staidans.

³ McDowell, *ibid.*